

Changing Skyline

By Inga Saffron



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer
At Capital Flats, formerly Capital Meats, in Northern Liberties, architect Tim McDonald laid out the loft units as the creative spirit moved him.

A cut above: Meat plant to apartments

Tim McDonald's new Capital Flats apartment building in Northern Liberties is to architecture what Jackson Pollock's action paintings are to art: a meeting of chance and design.

While most architectural projects are plotted out through a series of careful drawings and models, the apartments carved out of the vacant Capital Meats packing plant were all designed on the fly. Rather than determine the floor plans in advance, McDonald laid out each unit by intuition, popping in windows, skylights, catwalks, and balconies as the creative spirit moved him.

Yeah, yeah. I know what you're thinking — certain contractors do this all the time. But McDonald is a trained architect who has taught at Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania. So, while each apartment was arranged extemporaneously, they are not arbitrary. His aesthetic choices were informed by architectural ideas about space and light, and social ideas about work and life. The result is a thought-provoking challenge to the conventional style of loft conversion.

The design challenge couldn't come at a better time. With the surrounding Northern Liberties neighborhood on an upward trajectory, many factories are being transformed into apartments. Developer Bart Blatstein is also building new

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In ex-meat plant, choice living space

SKYLINE from E1
 lofts in the area, which he says are intended for artists. McDonald's lofts are not only open to artists, they are a work of art.

McDonald had been looking for a place to try out his design ideas last year when he discovered the 15,000 square-foot property at Laurel and Hancock Streets. He took one look at the gloomy space, with its blood-spattered floors and rusted meat hooks, and decided it was a perfect place to live. Located just south of the former Schmidt's Brewery

on Girard Avenue, the plant had sat empty for over a decade before McDonald bought it for \$60,000.

Usually, when a factory is adapted for apartments, the rougher industrial features are stripped away, leaving only vestigial reminders of the building's original purpose. But instead of sanitizing the Capital Meats buildings, McDonald kept many of the elements used by its butchers to turn sides of beef into dinner-size portions.

Not only do the original glazed-brick floors remain, so do the drains where the blood once flowed. Mysterious metal apurtenances still jut from the walls and ceilings like works of sculpture. Thick steel freezer doors now serve as bathroom doors. In one apartment, the bathroom was tucked into an elevator shaft. Its ceiling is 25 feet high and the sink hangs on the elevator's former rails.

The eight apartments, which are all different, are flexible, multipurpose spaces. They can be arranged as wide-open lofts or closed off into discrete rooms with sliding glass doors.

Just as Pollock's canvases are a visual record of his painting process, the Capital Flats — named in honor of the defunct meat company — are a record of McDonald's architecture process. Pollock was known to let his cigarette butts and other detritus drop onto his paintings. McDonald incorporated his architectural drawings in the apartment design. Rough

sketches, which he drew on the walls as he worked, are still visible behind a coat of clear sealer. The idea was to capture the inspiration of the moment and freeze it in a work of art.

"We work with chance," McDonald told me as he bounded up the concrete stairs. "The improvised immediacy of the cre-

ative process has been wonderful." In addition to designing the lofts, he did all the construction work himself, together with his brother Patrick, a master plumber, and two former students, Kurt Schlen-

baker and Shawn Dougherty.

McDonald, who had previously renovated an Old City building on Market Street in a more conventional fashion, freely admits that he could not have gotten away with his improvisational working style if he had been hired by a client. "I was tired of hearing clients tell me I couldn't do certain stuff," he explained. "As an architect, you have to develop a base and then spend years and years working for other people. Life is too short."

Capital Flats may be too gritty for some tastes. In many apartments, McDonald left the layers of peeling paint on the walls and simply glazed over them. In his zeal to bring light into the building, he punched holes in the oddest places. One living room has a catwalk that leads nowhere, except to a window located at the top of a double-height ceiling.

But if the interior is a delirious improvisation, the western exterior wall is a disciplined formalist composition of shapes, material and color. McDonald faced the wall with seamed roofing steel, corrugated steel, and orange metal panels to create one of the building's most distinctive features.

Ironically, he's been offered several commissions from local people who walked by Capital Flats and liked it. He turned them down. McDonald explained, "I'm having too much fun on my own."

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at Capital Flats
in Northern
Liberties: Floor
drains, freezer
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